The management of toxic ash from solid waste incinerators has split the environmental movement and is threatening to alienate Congressional leaders from their environmental supporters. We have a solution to propose.

U.S. Congressman James Florio (D-NJ) recently introduced federal legislation that would seem to solve a major problem for the municipal solid waste incineration industry. (See RHWN #85.) Growth of the industry has slowed because the ash from incinerators is so heavily laced with toxic heavy metals that it often qualifies as a legally-hazardous waste. Increasingly, investors and local officials are shying away from a technology that transforms ordinary household garbage into a waste that is legally hazardous. (See RHWN #83.) The "hazardous" designation makes solid waste incinerators a political hot potato and provides grass roots activists with potent ammunition for shooting down dangerous trash-to-steam proposals.

Mr. Florio's bill would strip the name "hazardous" from incinerator ash, thus making it much easier to site an ash landfill, thus removing a major stumbling block to development of mass burn technology. Mr. Florio's bill would require ash landfills to have triple liners (which the industry opposes vigorously), but Mr. Florio knows better than most people that all liners will eventually leak and that even triple-lined ash landfills are simply the next generation of Superfund sites.

Mr. Florio wrote the Superfund law, so he understands how and why landfills fail, and he understands the long-term costs of burying toxics in the ground.

When Mr. Florio held a press conference to announce his bill, he was joined by a well-known national environmental organization, Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). EDF has been a leader on this issue. It was EDF scientist Richard Denison who first blew the whistle on incinerator ash, pointing out its hazardous characteristics.

People familiar with Mr. Florio's long record of good work for the environment, and with EDF's, were puzzled by the apparent reversal on this key issue.

We believe Mr. Florio and EDF are acting in good faith, but they seem to have misjudged the intensity of opposition to mass burn felt by the grass roots movement, which is fighting these incinerators as a matter of life and death, literally.

In a recent meeting, Mr. Florio said his bill is better than no bill at all, and it is better than a competing bill proposed by Thomas Luken (D-OH), which would simply declare the ash non-hazardous and would allow it to be dumped anywhere. Mr. Florio is right that the Luken bill is a disaster. But grass roots activists would prefer that Mr. Florio drop the whole matter. They believe the Luken bill is so bad it can be defeated, and they believe the "hazardous" label on the ash is one of the strongest weapons they have for stopping incinerators across the country. Grass roots activists view the loss of the "hazardous" designation on the ash as capitulation to the enemy. In this sense, Mr. Florio and EDF are alienating their closest allies while trying to do them a favor. Mr. Florio and EDF argue that their flawed proposal is the best that can be gotten through Congress, and thus should be passed. Grass roots groups view this as a fatal compromise and a sellout. A situation like this calls for rethinking and a new approach.

In Mr. Florio's case the situation is especially complex. Some of the Congressman's long-time political allies, partners, fund-raisers and co-workers have recently left government service and have set up two separate corporations to promote solid waste incineration and the landfilling of toxic ash.

Mr. Florio runs a strong political organization in southern New Jersey which raises the campaign funds necessary to get the Congressman (and others) elected.

The players in this drama: Joseph Salema, went to work for Jim Florio in 1972 right out of college. In 1974 he became Mr. Florio's Congressional campaign manager. Mr. Florio won that election and he named Salema his district manager, later his chief of staff. In 1979, Mr. Florio waged war against the entrenched Democratic machine in Camden, ousting Angelo Errichetti as king of the Camden County Democrats. The Camden COURIER-POST says, "Although he resigned as Florio's chief of staff in 1984, Salema has continued to quietly manage the Florio kingdom in South Jersey."

In 1984, Salema quit his official staff position with Mr. Florio and began a new life in the private sector. With former Camden County Administrator Nick Rudi, and with U.S. Senator Bill Bradley's campaign treasurer (in both 1978 and 1984), Peter J. Burke, Jr., Salema formed Consolidated Financial Management Co. (CFM) whose major clients are government agencies building trash-to-steam plants. "Using their political contacts as well as the expertise they developed in government, particularly in the financing of trash-to-steam plants, Salema and his partners have also landed government contracts in Gloucester, Morris, Bergen and Passaic Counties in New Jersey and St. Lucie County, Florida," says Dennis Culnan in the COURIER-POST.

Other of Mr. Florio's close political associates and advisers have formed a second company that develops trash-to-steam plants. Siegfried ("Siggy") Dahms, Mr. Florio's campaign pilot who succeeded Nick Rudi as Camden County administrator from May, 1984 to June, 1987, recently quit government and went into business with the county's former solid waste administrator, John R. Purves, to sell their expertise in trash-to-steam.

Mr. Dahms acquired expertise in the incinerator as county administrator and as treasurer of the Camden County Pollution Control Finance Authority, which was created to develop the trash-to-steam plant that Nick Rudi had put on track when he was county administrator. Dahms and Purves in 1987 founded Eastern Resources Management Co. (ERM). They have a contract to develop a trash-to-steam plant for Morris County, NJ. A July, 1988, press release from ERM says the firm is active in Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, and Florida. The firm "specializes in utility regulation consulting to collectors/haulers," and now represents over 40 private firms in CT, PA and NJ. It is now branching into hazardous waste collection, transport, and disposal.

If something doesn't change, the grass roots movement will be badly alienated from EDF and from one of its strongest environmental leaders in Congress. We propose that Mr. Florio and Senator Bradley convene a series of meetings with EDF and with a broad spectrum of grass roots activists. Together they can hammer out a solid waste platform we all can live with. Mr. Florio and Mr. Bradley can turn the platform into national legislation. The platform can set realistic goals for re-use and recycling, call for using the Toxic Substances Control Act to force removal of toxics from the waste stream at the source (pollution prevention), and give mass burn the place it deserves in any waste management hierarchy--that of a desperate last resort, an admission of solid waste management failure. Mr. Florio can begin to oppose trash-to-steam vigorously. The meetings would build solidarity between traditional groups and the new breed of grass roots activists, and would give Mr. Florio and Mr. Bradley an opportunity to demonstrate that they can rise above the petty snares laid for them by the poor judgement of their political associates. It will offer them an opportunity to demonstrate the environmental leadership we all so urgently need in Washington, especially now.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: landfilling; ash; msw; incineration; james florio; bill bradley; politicians; corruption; conflict of interest; camden, nj; democratic party; nj; pennsauken, nj; morris county, nj;